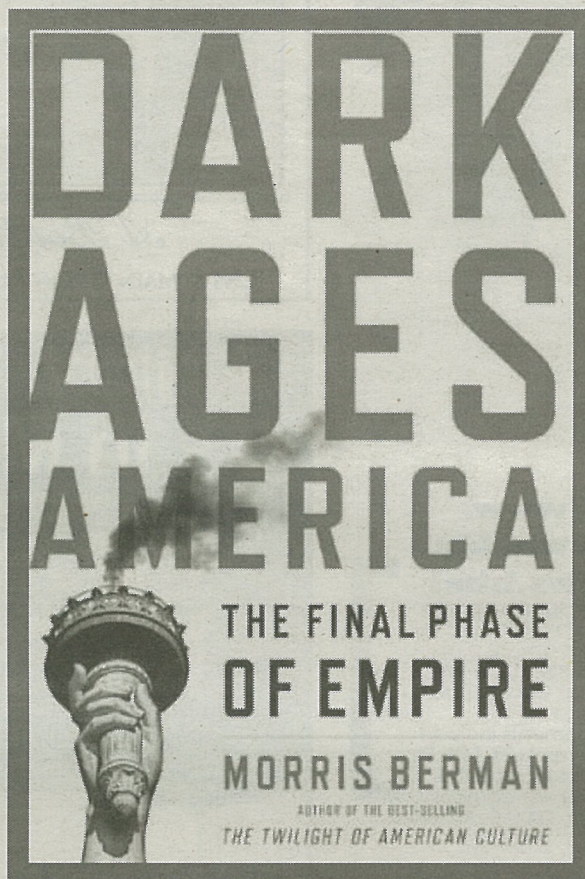


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The End of Empire

Historian Morris Berman outlines
the fall of the American Empire
in *Dark Ages America*
by Vince Darcangelo



Morris Berman's *Dark Ages America: The Final Phase of Empire* probably won't make anyone's Best Books for the Beach list this summer. Let's just say it doesn't have a happy ending—or beginning or middle. What *Dark Ages America* does have is a heavy helping of facts and commentary concerning the modern-day United States—and the news isn't good. Berman offers a hard, honest look in the mirror many Americans aren't willing to take, declaring that America's global supremacy has reached

its end. Putting us in historical context, Berman draws comparisons between 21st-century America and the latter days of the Roman Empire, concluding that America is entering a dark age that will reduce us to second- or third-rate status by 2040, and that it is too late to reverse course.

A cultural historian, Berman first garnered attention with his 2000 book *The Twilight of American Culture*, in which he rightly predicted that America would soon come

see **EMPIRE** Page 19

overtones

<http://www.boulderweekly.com/overtones.html>

Lyrical throwdown

by Chris Clark

For some reason, hip-hop music and Boulder just seem to work well together. Considering the area's relative isolation (those massive mountains to the west and miles of monotonous plains to the east), somehow urban culture continues to thrive right here in the Front Range. Well at least urban music, that is. As high-

profile acts like MF Doom, Immortal Technique and The Roots continue to make time for enthusiastic crowds on The Hill, more underground, grassroots hip-hop also seems to find a niche here as well.

This Tuesday, the Fox Theatre will play host to a preliminary round of the hip-hop festival of festivals: Scribble Jam. Located in Cincinnati

each summer, Scribble Jam is the premiere event in hip-hop. And it's not just about the music. B-Boys, MCs, DJs, graffiti artists, beatbox battles and an assortment of live performances grace Cincy for several days, exploring the roots, present and future of the culture that is hip-hop.

see **SCRIBBLE JAM** Page 21

inside

Page 22 / Overtones:

The new C&C music factory

Page 24 / GameFace:

Drug-free baseball

Page 33 / Getting it on!:

Getting it off!... too soon

Page 37 / Screen:

Disturbed genius?

[buzz cuts]

Can't-miss events for
the upcoming week

Dana Berger



Deathray Davies

Thursday

C.R.A.B. — New monthly showcase for local artists, put on by the Boulder International Fringe Festival, helps keep Boulder weird all year long. Laughing Goat, 1709 Pearl St., Boulder, 303-440-4628.

Friday

Stellastar — Modern rock mood stabilizer tours in support of its breakthrough release, *Harmonies for the Haunted*. Bluebird Theatre, 3317 E. Colfax Ave., Denver, 303-322-2308.

Saturday

The Roots — Influential hip-hop group brings positive vibes to Boulder. Balch Fieldhouse, CU Campus, Boulder, 303-492-7704.

Sunday

Mae — Rising rock outfit offers Boulder a rare helping of emo. Fox Theatre, 1135 13th St., Boulder, 303-443-3399.

Monday

DJ Dario — Denver's favorite beach-rock revivalist spins the "Mondo Mod." Skylark Lounge, 140 S. Broadway, Denver, 303-722-7844.

Tuesday

Deathray Davies — One-time indie up-and-comers got weird on us with their breakthrough *Midnight at the Black Nail Polish Factory*, but cemented their indie cool with last year's *The Kick and the Snare*. Hi-Dive, 7 S. Broadway, Denver, 720-570-4500.

Wednesday

Jazz Combos — Escape the spring heat with some cool jazz. Grusin Music Hall, CU Campus, Boulder, 303-492-8008. **(Z)**

under attack as a counter-response to our corporate- and military-driven global policies. In *Dark Ages America*, Berman says that we've yet to learn the lessons of 9/11 and have set a course for cultural collapse and global irrelevance. He does so by discussing the moral decay of American culture, the blundering invasion of Iraq, the near-comical political missteps of the Bush administration, and an in-depth exploration of America's global policies in the 20th century, examining our postwar rise and our post-Vietnam fall.

On Monday, Berman will appear at the Boulder Book Store. Prior to that he hooked up with Boulder Weekly to discuss the fall of the American Empire, why we can thank Jimmy Carter for 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, and what kind of beer he'd like to drink with everyone's favorite ex-president. What follows is an excerpt of the interview. The complete interview is available online at www.boulderweekly.com/buz-lead.html.

Boulder Weekly: What was the motivation for writing *Dark Ages America*, and what sort of response do you hope the book elicits?

Morris Berman: I never expected to write it. I had written *The Twilight of American Culture*, and it appeared 15 months before 9/11... After 9/11, something was staring at me so obviously. In *Twilight*, I had done a comparison of the contemporary United States and Rome in the late-empire period. I compared the two in terms of structural factors that were doing each civilization in and arguing that they were the same factors.

But there was one point of comparison that I completely overlooked, and that became apparent only after 9/11—that was that Rome was invaded and then fought a long war of attrition that was finally lost. That's what happening to us. There is no way we're going to defeat terrorism. It's an elusive technique. How can you defeat terrorism? Not that al Qaeda can win, but they've got lots of time and lots of anger. They're going to keep doing what they're doing, and we're going to keep disintegrating.

There was the motivation. As far as my guess of what difference it will make, I would say none at all... I expect to be vilified and ignored.

BW: Which would you prefer?

MB: There is this saying that bad press is better than no press. I don't know if that's true. Part of the problem of being vilified is that it usually involves a distortion.

BW: If what you're saying is true and there's nothing we can do about it, shouldn't I be stockpiling weapons for the coming Dark Age instead of reading this book?

MB: The question is what you

would use the weapon on. Maybe we should just shoot ourselves. In *Twilight* I talked about the one thing people could do was cultural preservation... I saw that as the only solution, but it's not really a solution. When finally the only thing that can be done is what individuals can do, that means the system has completely broken down. Our problems are structural, and if problems are structural, then the solutions have to be structural. That's Sociology 101. Individual solutions are nice, but they're not solutions, they're responses. It would be nice if people preserved things, but I don't believe there's a hope in turning this situation around. It's not a question

"We don't have a public that's aware, outraged or even upset. We have a public that basically is drugged, apathetic and interested in shopping."

— Morris Berman

of whether optimism is good and pessimism is bad. It's a question of, alright, if you don't believe what I'm saying when I say there is no way of turning things around, show me the levers of social change, point to them, tell me how this is gonna happen.

And don't point to the Democratic Party, because the Democratic Party is intellectually bankrupt and politically impotent. Don't talk to me about Hillary, for God's sake. She's rattling the sabers against Iran. What a joke. The Democratic Party has essentially bought into the Republican Party. We saw that during the Clinton years; he was just a Republican in Democratic clothing. The choice between the Republicans and Democrats is the choice between empire and empire-lite.

We do not have a large section of this country up in arms. They may give Bush a low approval rating, but the truth is that if we were winning the war in Iraq his approval rating would be very high. It's not a moral objection or a political objection—most Americans have no understanding of the war in Iraq; they don't even understand what happened except that it didn't work out well. We're in a situation where we can torture people. To my knowledge, we're the first modern nation that has made torture legal. On top of that, we put the guy who legalized it head of the Department of Justice. George Orwell move over. This is surreal.

And Americans aren't upset about that. They're not upset about Abu Ghraib. I would even argue that Bush got reelected *because* of Abu Ghraib, not in spite of it. It's not like Americans are upset that people can be detained indefinitely without trial and the right to an attorney. They're not upset that the NSA is spying on them. I don't know what it would take to get the American people upset. You could probably herd Iraqis into gas chambers

and Americans would say, "Gee, we shouldn't be doing that." The days of Vietnam protests are definitely not here. We don't have a similar situation. We don't have a public that's aware, outraged or even upset. We have a public that basically is drugged, apathetic and interested in shopping.

BW: What's interesting to me is that you look at Jimmy Carter and his role in current events. While you applaud some of the stuff that he did, you point out in the book that even he made diplomatic errors, in particular the Carter Doctrine in 1980 that started the military buildup in the Persian Gulf.

You attribute both 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq to Carter and his response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. If the most levelheaded president of my lifetime can screw up this badly, then what hope is there? Carter *was* the alternative. What alternative is left?

MB: Yeah, it's a tragic story. I have to tell you, if there's one person I'd like to sit down and have a beer with, it's Jimmy. I wonder what's in his mind in the sense that he was the person who really understood that we were causing our problems. The whole business about spiritual malaise and soul searching and having to cut back on energy and how we were engaged in human-rights violations—he saw it all. And then, under the pressure of losing popularity and the influence of [Carter's National Security Advisor] Zbigniew Brzezinski—who, after all, is a Pole who hated the Soviet Union—the Carter Doctrine emerged. Not only that, Brzezinski, in 1998, did an interview in Paris in which he admitted that he and Carter started training the Mujahadeen, planning to draw the Soviet Union into Afghanistan six months before they invaded. They set a trap for them. 9/11 is the blowback from Carter's policies. What an incredible irony.

The real problem is that we've never been able to get out of the Cold War mentality. As much as Carter tried, he couldn't do it. He couldn't see that what the Soviet Union was doing with Afghanistan was a defensive move against the Arab world, which we then, of course, got into later on.


BW: It would appear that the Cold War was largely an invention designed to maintain the U.S. and U.S.S.R. as superpowers. However, this battle of gestures led to proxy wars, such as Afghanistan, that mobilized the Arab world, in turn creating a fervent enemy that is very much real.

MB: Finally, it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. That's essentially what really happened. I'm not saying to our readers that I think 9/11 was imaginary or that it didn't occur. I'm saying that finally you do enough crummy things to a certain segment of the world and, you

see **EMPIRE** Page 20

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know what, they're going to get angry.

BW: You state at the end of Chapter Four that for us to reverse course "requires a grace, a flexibility and an imagination" that you believe Americans don't have. What do you think it would take for Americans to acquire this grace, flexibility and imagination? Would it require outside intervention?

MB: Well, in a dramatic sense, an act of God, because it's not going to happen. To take the examples of two nations that were on a supremely self-destructive course—Germany and Japan in the '30s and '40s—what it took to get them to turn around was that they were utterly and totally destroyed... It wasn't going to stop until the United States in particular came along and made it impossible for them to continue.

I don't believe that al Qaeda is going to destroy us. They're going to erode us, but it's not like they're going to be fire-bombing Minneapolis. It's not going to happen in the same way, but what will happen—the appropriate model is not Germany or Japan but ancient Rome. It basically died from a thousand cuts.

I have to tell you that somewhere—I don't believe he's in a cave; I have a feeling he's in a library at the University of Islamabad working the Internet—but somewhere Osama bin Laden is looking at this, and he's saying, "Thank you, George W. Bush. You did it better than I could have ever imagined."

BW: You pose the question: Who will take over for us, China or the European Union? Who would you say is the frontrunner right now? Could you see a third possibility, such as a Middle Eastern power, say Saudi Arabia, rising to take the place of the American Empire? And if so, would it be one Arab country or a conglomerate similar to the European Union?

MB: I don't think that the Arab nations have it to get their act together. Those regimes are terribly corrupt. They also are very oppressive of their people. I think that the Arab nations will play... the role of the source of attrition that weakens us beyond belief and beyond repair. Their historic role is that they will be the thousand cuts that debilitate us.

While we're wasting all our money, time and energy fighting this shadow enemy, the money is piling up in China and the E.U. They're busy building their economies and doing the types of things that intelligent civilizations do. So, it's hard to know in that contest what will happen. But I have no doubt in my mind that by 2040 we will be taking our marching orders from other people.

BW: What do you think that will look like? Will it be a situation where we kind of disappear? Or will it be more like England, where they're still a rele-

vant country, they just don't have the empire like they used to?

MB: Yeah, they live under a cloud and, the famous phrase, they've become America's poodle. I see something like that as the likely scenario. These things move slowly, and there's a cultural lag. But let me give you the relevant scenario:

Most historians understand now that Britain was really economically in serious trouble and really had feet of clay by the time the Boer War ended in 1902. Looking back, that was really when the rot set in... However, the appearance of England in 1902—after all, Queen Victoria was still alive—was the sun never sets on the British Empire. Down to something

like 1950, that was still the image of England.

Then an interesting thing happened—the Suez Crisis. Eisenhower was very angry with England, France and Israel, and he threatened to cause the pound to be devalued if England didn't back off. They knew they had to do it. At that moment, the cultural lag caught up to reality. At that moment there was an international shift. Everybody understood what some people understood in 1910 and 1920 and 1930: that England was no longer a serious player. We are no longer a serious player. It's just that there are very few people now who recognize it. There has to be something that's equivalent to Suez. There was some hint of that when Rumsfeld went over to Germany and said to Joschka Fischer, who was then the foreign minister, you've got to join us and we're going to defeat Iraq, and he said, "I'm not convinced of any of this." That Germany would say to the United States that you're full of crap, there was already a hint that something had shifted, but it didn't have the international force of something like Suez. But Suez is in our future. There is no doubt in my mind about that. There will come a time when there will be an incident, and it will be understood that the United States has eaten itself alive and doesn't have the clout to respond. After that, it will slowly drift in the direction that England has drifted today. People will pay lip service to its grandeur and its history and all that, but a poodle is not a tiger.

BW: You mentioned before that if you could sit down and have a beer with anyone, it would be with Jimmy Carter. Would it be a Billy Beer?

MB: Would it be what?

BW: Billy Beer?

MB: What is Billy Beer?

BW: That was Carter's brother's beer in the '70s.

MB: What did it taste like?

BW: Crap.

MB: Well, I'm hoping Jimmy and I can find a nice little microbrewery. **(Z)**